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ABSTRACT

It is a myth that skills alone ensure employment. Other keys to workplace success include continuous learning, emotional intelligence, networking, flexibility, and commitment to business objectives. Although academic degrees, skill certifications, and other documentation of accomplishments provide access to employment, they are significant only at the time of the job offer and its acceptance. Continuous learning is the key to ensuring ongoing employment. More keys to employment success include the following: interpersonal and social skills; listening and persuasion skills; ability to get along with others; ability to make one's talents and accomplishments known; and courteousness and respectfulness toward everyone. To some extent, it is true that it's who you know that counts. The key to knowing the right people is knowing how to network (in other words, meeting people and drawing upon those contacts to further your career). Two important networking strategies are the following: (1) learn about and select networking events to attend; and (2) linking with a mentor who can serve as a guide or adviser. Although some anticipation is necessary to be ready for various career junctures, speculating on work demands and outcomes rather than asking supervisors directly about their expectations is a stress enhancer. (Contains 11 references.) (MN)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

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MYTHS AND REALITIES NO. 2 *1999*

Good Work Ensures Employment Success

With increased attention to skill standards and worker certification, people tend to consider their qualifications solely in relationship to the occupational skills they have acquired. This publication addresses the myth that skill competencies alone ensure employment and discusses the value of continuous learning, emotional intelligence, networking, flexibility, and commitment to business objectives as other keys to workplace success.

A Graduation Certificate Can Get You in the Door

Although it is true that academic degrees, skill certifications, and other documentation of accomplishments provide access to employment, they are significant only at the time of the job offer and its acceptance. Skills that a person has today may be obsolete tomorrow; knowledge that has current significance to society may be insignificant in the future. Technology is the most obvious example. Routine functions such as inventory control, customer profiling, machine calibration, and document publishing are now assumed by technology. Workers who previously performed these functions have had to learn new skills such as how to operate the machines that have taken over these tasks and how to use technology to streamline their work efforts.

Continuous learning is the key to the transition role that ensures a worker of ongoing employment. Workers must be continually striving to keep their skills up to date, technologically current, and relevant to their employing organizations. As more of the routine tasks of the job are performed by machines, as cyclical patterns influence the numbers of workers that employers need in a given month, and as global competition drives companies to be more cost effective, workers must develop skills that will enable them to work across departments of their companies. They must be continually assessing ways in which they can prepare for work their employers and society will need them to perform in the future.

Participation in cross-training programs is another strategy for enhancing job security and success. Worker cross-training is becoming a common practice in business and industry, adopted as a means of coping with reduced staffing and increased worker mobility. In the recreational vehicle industry where it is difficult to recruit people who have relevant skills, for example, the cross-training of dealers makes it easier for owners to appoint these employees to management positions when resignations occur (Packard 1999). Cross-trained workers can reap significant benefits from such company-provided training programs as well as from involvement in community-based service organizations. "Sometimes outside activities and volunteer work can help you become more 'layoff-proof' by providing opportunities to develop expertise that you can bring back to the company" (Lieber 1996, p. 73).

"Sweet Talking" Reaps Benefits

"You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." Everyone knows people who are extremely skilled, but an albatross to their organizations. They complain, deride, agitate, and are tactless in their interactions with others. Their lack of interpersonal and social skills is one of the greatest deterrents to their job success. Supervisors, co-workers, and customers are eager to avoid them because they cause stress, are intimidating, and impede progress toward organizational goals. Because teamwork is an important part of quality management and work performance, good interpersonal skills are crucial to ongoing employment. Daniel Goleman, author of ***Working with Emotional Intelligence***, stresses the importance of such skills as empathy, teamwork, dedication, self-confidence, and an ability to influence others (Salopek 1998). He notes that emotional competencies are "twice as important as IQ and job-specific skills in detecting the success of business people" (Barrier and Bates 1999, p. 17). "For leadership positions, these skills account for close to 90 percent of what distinguishes the most outstanding leaders from average ones" (Salopek 1998, p. 27).

Among the highest-ranked emotional competencies are listening and persuasion. Although persuasion can be construed as being manipulative and self-serving, it can also be constructive, serving both self and others (Pascarella 1998). Workers who can persuade others have credibility, are aligned with the concerns of others, use delivery strategies that motivate listeners, and connect with the emotions of others. In his new book ***Winning 'em Over***, Jay Conger notes that "relying on emotions alone to convince others will cause your listener to feel manipulated or give him the impression that you act without thinking. . . You must always have a foundation of good reasons and evidence underpinning your emotional appeals" (ibid., p. 68).

Getting along with others is a key strategy for ensuring job security. Lieber (1996) highlights the importance of developing and maintaining friendship in the organization. "As you might expect . . ., when you get a group of human beings around a table to decide whether people will be fired, there's more that goes into it than hard, objective data. All things being equal, at the end of the day, they just sit down and decide whether they like you or not" (p. 80). It is always advantageous to have multiple champions in an organization. If you link yourself too closely with one individual, such as the company president, and he gets fired, your job may be the next in jeopardy.

A good strategy for success is to make your talents and accomplishments known to many and to treat everyone with courtesy and respect. Volunteering to be a team leader or serving on cross-functional teams in the organization are other strategies to help you stand out. Not only do these experiences contribute to your skill development, but they expose you (and your expertise) to workers outside your immediate section and extend your in-house network.

It's Who You Know that Counts

Although not what the skilled person wants to believe, to some extent it is true that it's who you know that counts. However, knowing the "right" people is not a trait limited to the privileged class who know people in top management and administrative positions. Knowing the right people means knowing how to network.

Among the 10 most mentioned tips for career success is networking (Arenofsky 1999). Networking involves meeting people and drawing upon those contacts to further your (and often their) career. Learning about and selecting events to attend requires investigation and analysis. Professional organizations, trade journals, and people in your field can be valuable sources of events that associates of similar interest might attend. For example, the Organization of Women in International Trade's website (www.owit.org) provides to members a list of educational network events, a newsletter, and

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an online job bank. Knowing your abilities and the contributions you might be able to make to other event attendees can be a criteria for event selection.

Another networking strategy is to link with a mentor who can serve as a guide and adviser and who might introduce you to the inner circles of the corporation. This person could work in the same organization as you, or be a former employer, teacher, member of a professional association, friend, or relative ("Survey Finds" 1999). Most important is that this person be someone whose work you admire, who is willing to help you, and who is in a more advanced position than you are (ibid.). Volunteering to help people you would like to consider as mentors could bring your skills and career goals to their attention and lead them to see that you are considered for the right assignment (Connelly 1999).

Because networking involves risk taking, involvement in it suggests to others that you are self-confident and dedicated to achieving your career goals. One of the most difficult networking tactics is telling others of your achievements and successes. Connelly (1999) notes that women have more difficulty than men doing this for fear that their comments might be construed as "bragging." However, all it takes is a little practice. Colleagues, supervisors, and managers who are not immediately connected with your work may not learn of these accomplishments unless you mention them. You can never have enough supporters in the job market.

Anticipation Can Provoke Unwanted Job Stress

Speculating on work demands and outcomes rather than asking supervisors up-front about their expectations is a stress enhancer. "It's estimated that businesses lose $100 billion each year to stress-related problems such as headaches, stomach problems, fatigue, and emotional 'burnout'" (Arenofsky 1999, p. 3). A more logical approach to task performance and problem solving is suggested to replace unnecessary worrying.

Some anticipation is necessary to be ready for various career junctures. Grove (1999) suggests that everyone act as if they were CEOs of their company, people who are open to and seek outside views and stimuli. He suggests that every career has inflection points that can advance or destroy it and advises that career-conscious individuals "read newspapers, attend industry conferences, network with colleagues in other companies, and listen to chatter from colleagues and friends" (p. 188).

Summary

Flexibility and an ability to adapt to change are key to employment security in the 21st century. "In business, the ability to change course, reevaluate your position, and take different steps is very important . . . If you're too structured to innovate, you'll lose" (Lovell 1999, p. 32). The globalization of markets and economies that connects nations and people is a testament to the prevalence of flexible employment. Multiskilled, cross-trained workers who have the advantage of marketing themselves both within and outside of an organization are opting for flexible employment conditions—interdepartmental transfers, part-time work, working from the home, and self-employment (Merson 1996). The key to employment success is to be flexible enough to recognize and develop the thinking, problem-solving, interpersonal, and job-specific skills required in a continually changing job market.

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